#HamasisISIS?: Assessing the campaign comparing proscribed groups

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#HamasisISIS?

Following the 7 October terrorist attack committed by Hamas which killed (https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-revises-death-toll-oct-7-hamas-attack-around-1200-2023-11-10/) around 1,200 people in Israel, prominent Israeli government figures and pro-government influencers have drawn comparisons between or even equated Hamas and the Islamic State (ISIS).

While some of these comparisons may be understandable in the context of the extreme brutality of the attack, the differences between the two proscribed terrorist groups' ideological aims and tactics used are significant. In this article, ISD therefore outlines what Hamas and ISIS have in common, how they differ, and why conflating them is misleading.

Background of the groups

Who is Hamas?

Hamas, or '*Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya'* (the Islamic Resistance Movement) is a Palestinian militant group proscribed (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/proscribed-terror-groups-or-organisations--2/proscribed-terrorist-groups-or-organisations-accessible-version) as a terrorist organisation by the UK government and many Western countries, which blends Islamism (https://www.brookings.edu/tags/islamists-on-islamism-today/) and Palestinian nationalism. The group emerged (https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-hamas) in 1987 as an alternative to the secular-nationalist Palestinian Fatah, which had dominated the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). Fatah's recognition of Israel, perceived corruption (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/jan/24/israel) and the failure of their diplomatic approach (https://www.nytimes.com/1988/12/08/world/arafat-says-plo-accepted-israel.html)[1] to secure an

independent Palestinian state or cease Israeli settlements (https://www.btselem.org/settlements) and military occupation (https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution) in the West Bank and Gaza contributed to increasing (https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jps.2006.35.3.6) popular support for Hamas, who in 2006 won (https://www.reuters.com/article/us-palestinians-timeline/timeline-key-events-since-2006-hamas-election-victory-idUSL1752364420070620/) legislative elections. In 2007, Hamas took (https://www.brookings.edu/articles/battle-for-gaza-hamas-jumped-provoked-and-pushed/) control of Gaza— a densely populated city of over 2 million people between Israel and Egypt, to which Israel responded by blockading (https://www.unicef.org/mena/documents/gaza-strip-humanitarian-impact-15-years-blockade-june-2022) the Gaza strip. Ever since, Gaza and the West Bank have been under the control of two rival political Palestinian factions: Fatah, which rules as the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, and Hamas in Gaza.

Hamas' original 1988 charter (https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp) is explicitly antisemitic and references (https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp) 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion', an antisemitic publication widely distributed by the Nazi regime. The charter was revised (https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hamas-2017-document-full) in 2017 without renouncing the previous iteration, and no longer includes the most egregious antisemitic language, identifying "the Zionist project" as its enemy rather than Jews. Nevertheless, Hamas continues to refuse (https://www.reuters.com/article/us-palestinians-hamas-document-idUSKBN17X1N8) to recognise the state of Israel, and both Israelis and Hamas officials denied (https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-hamas-idUSKBN1862PK/) that the revision meant that Hamas was abandoning its maximalist aims: "the full and complete liberation of Palestine" (https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hamas-2017-document-full). While initially defining itself as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, a mostly non-violent (https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Hamzawy-Grebowski-EN.pdf) Islamist movement, Hamas excluded (https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/5/2/hamas-accepts-palestinian-state-with-1967-borders) this description in the second iteration of its charter following Egypt's designation (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/25/egypt-declares-muslim-brotherhood-terrorist-group) of the Brotherhood as a terrorist group.

Who is ISIS?

ISIS, or 'Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (Syria)', is an Islamist militant organisation and erstwhile affiliate of al-Qaeda which has been designated (https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/un-sc-consolidated-list) a terrorist organisation by the United Nations. They captured territory in Syria and Iraq and declared (https://academic.oup.com/book/36890/chapter-abstract/322123859?redirectedFrom=fulltext) a 'caliphate' in 2014. Today militants have sworn allegiance and wield the ISIS flag from the Sahel (Islamic State Sahel Province (https://acleddata.com/2023/01/13/actor-profile-the-islamic-state-sahel-province/)) to Afghanistan (Islamic State Khorasan Province (https://acleddata.com/2018/02/23/islamic-state-in-afghanistan/)) and the Southern Philippines (https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/philippines/addressing-islamist-militancy-southern-philippines).

By the end of 2017 ISIS had lost (https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state) most of its territory and faced a US-led international coalition alongside local Kurdish forces and anti-Assad rebels. Iran-backed forces (https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_publication_docs/INTA91_1_01_Esfandiary_Tabatabai.pdf) not in the coalition, including the Syrian al-Assad regime, Hezbollah and the Popular Mobilization Forces (https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/more-than-militias-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces-are-here-to-stay./) (PMF), also fought against ISIS. Although ISIS was initially an al-Qaeda affiliate, the two groups are now ideological and territorial competitors (https://www.brookings.edu/articles/isis-vs-al-qaeda-jihadisms-global-civil-war/).

Campaign of comparison between Hamas and ISIS

While the comparisons between Hamas and ISIS became increasingly prominent following the 7 October attacks, they are not new. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has sought to associate Hamas and ISIS for nearly a decade; during the 2014 conflict between Israel and Hamas, when ISIS was in its ascendancy in Syria and Iraq, Netanyahu claimed that the two organisations were "branches of the same poisonous tree".

Figure 1. Years prior to the 7 October attack, two Israeli state-actor accounts posted visuals likening Hamas and ISIS. The first, shared by the Israeli Embassy of South Africa in 2015, addressed the use of child soldiers. The second, shared by the official account of the Israeli PM (then Netanyahu) in 2014, pointed to a common oppression of Christians, women and gay people.

However, in the wake of Hamas' 7 October attack, the Israeli Prime Minister went from describing Hamas and ISIS as branches of the same tree to directly conflating the groups. On 9 October, Netanyahu asserted (https://nypost.com/2023/10/10/hamas-is-isis-netanyahu-says-of-terrorist-savages/) "Hamas is ISIS," a sentiment repeated by state-linked accounts, from the IDF to the Foreign Ministry (https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=7289087714454634) and news platforms (https://www.facebook.com/kanipbc/posts/pfbid0HwiLwYxpoaPoubZQuGTpu3zrFBnBMhU3AHoaJqS8xLvvrkpQwFX3PteSvidP5nctl). Meanwhile, Israeli commentators and officials began referring to Hamas as 'Hamas-ISIS' in Arabic, Hebrew and English, to conflate the two groups.

Benjamin Netanyahu
Hamas-ISIS is sick.
They turn hospitals into headquarters for their terror.
We just released intelligence proving it.
Here it is:

Figure 2. Israeli state and pro-government 'hasbara' accounts referring to Hamas as 'Hamas-ISIS' (in Hebrew and Arabic as hamas-da'esh/ חמאס-דאעש / حماس-داعش)

The campaign was not limited to public figures and became a wide-reaching trend on social media, as is borne out by data from social media analysis tools Crowdtangle and Brandwatch. The data shows keyword use peaked on 12 October on X/Twitter (251, 335 mentions) and on 1 November (195.2k interactions) on Facebook, which is the preferred (https://www.statista.com/statistics/1317963/leading-social-media-platforms-in-israel/) social media platform of Israelis.

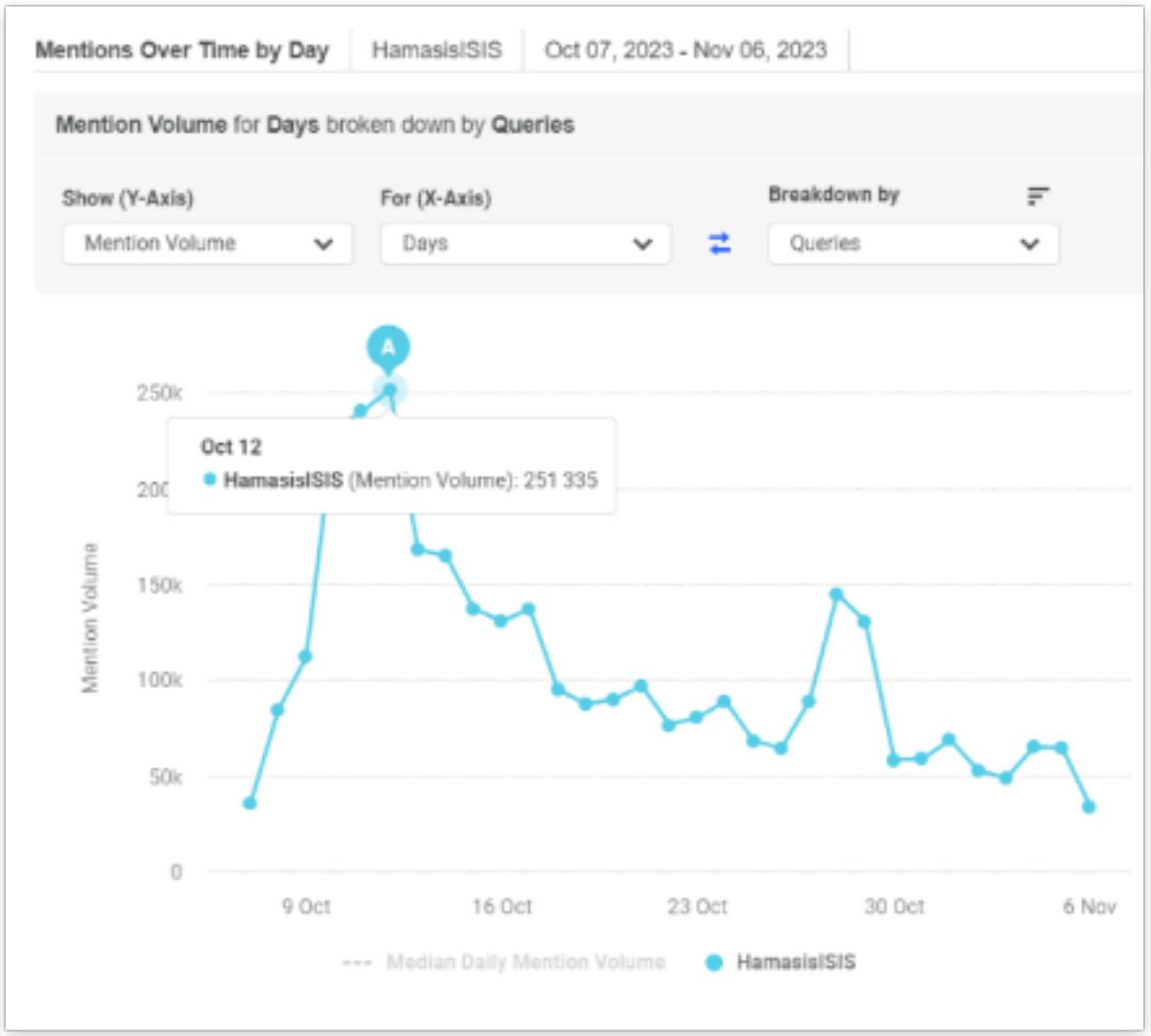


Figure 3. Brandwatch visualisation tracking a query of terms related to 'Hamas is ISIS' on X between 7 October and 6 November.

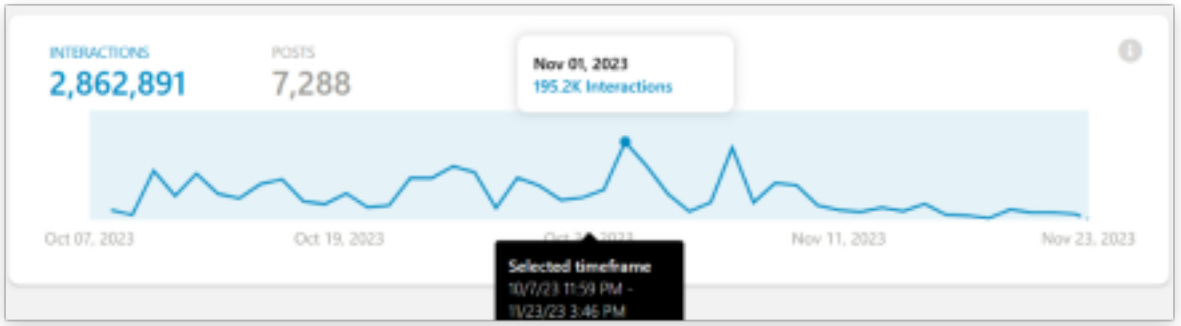


Figure 4. Crowdtangle visualization for the terms: חמאס-דאעש, Hamas-ISIS, HamasisISIS and Hamas=ISIS on Facebook between 7 October and 23 November.

Some analysts have suggested (https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/palestine-israel/2023/10/17/israels-hamas-isis-parallel-opening-door-to-scenes-of-gaza-annihilation/) that Israel is using the conflation to justify the extent of their own military retaliation. On 14 October, the Palestinian Ambassador to the UK

accused Israel of using the Hamas-ISIS linkage (https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/palestine-israel/2023/10/17/israels-hamas-isis-parallel-opening-door-to-scenes-of-gaza-annihilation/) to justify "ethnic cleansing", and asserted that "ISIS is a group of criminals, mercenaries, who came from all over the world. It has nothing to do with us and the Palestinian issue."[2] Professor Monica Marks, an expert in Islamist movements in the Middle East, similarly suggests (https://time.com/6329776/hamas-isis-gaza/) that such comparisons could be part of an effort to associate Hamas with threats to Western populations rather than to Israel alone, as a strategy to secure continued support (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/57170576) for Israel's war against Hamas.

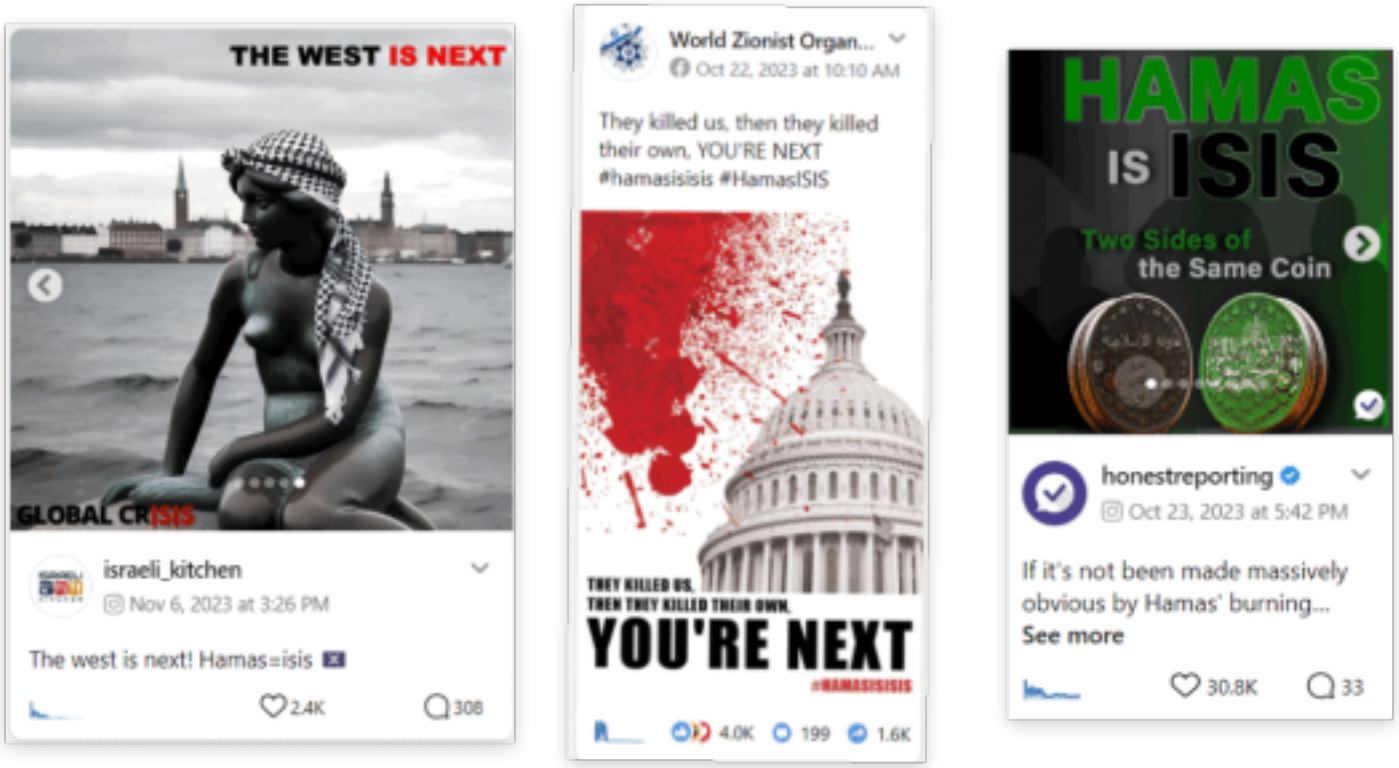


Figure 5. "Hamas is ISIS" graphics, aimed at convincing international audiences that Hamas is equivalent to ISIS and thus poses a threat to Western populations.

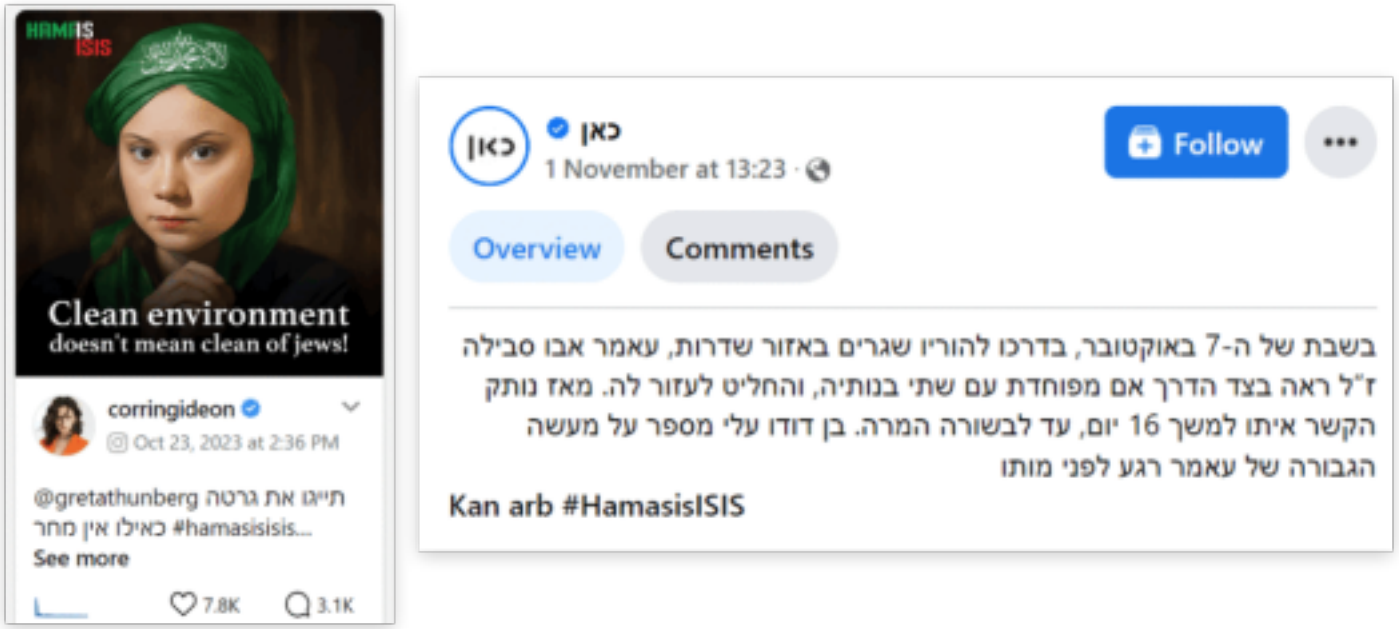


Figure 6. In the first post, Instagram Account @Corringideon uses AI manipulated media to convey environmental activist Greta Thunberg as a Hamas member, with the words HAMASISISIS appearing both as a hashtag and within the image. In the second, Israel's publicly owned news platform Kan uses the #HamasisISIS hashtag.

Hamas and ISIS: Understanding ideological and tactical divergence

Although it is understandable to draw comparisons given their targeting of civilians and shared status as proscribed Islamist terrorist groups, it is important to distinguish the ideological and tactical divergences between Hamas and ISIS.

Ideologically, Hamas blends Islamism and Palestinian nationalism. It is dedicated to establishing an Islamic state of Palestine on the territory of Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. In contrast, ISIS seeks to establish a 'caliphate' and spread its interpretation of the faith globally by force. This difference between local and international aims impacts the groups' relationship to the international system. Where Hamas wants (https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/11/21/hamas-isis-are-not-the-same-00128107) a state and a role in international organisations, ISIS seeks to conquer states and tear down the international system. ISIS' antipathy to the nation-state system as un-Islamic means it has no state allies, which further sets it apart from Hamas which is funded (https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-hamas) by Iran, a Shia state and one of ISIS' regional enemies.

Beyond the geographical scope of its ideological aims, the nature of the rule Hamas and ISIS seek to impose on governed populations likewise differs. When ISIS controlled significant swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq, the group became notorious for brutality against its enemies as much as against the population it governs, including massacres (https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/19/iraq-isis-abducting-killing-expelling-minorities) of minority communities such as the Yazidis and Shia Muslims, the mass execution (https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/30/iraq-isis-executed-hundreds-prison-inmates) of prisoners, persecution of minorities, filmed beheadings, crucifixions (https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-city-idUSKBN1341UJ/) and throwing alleged homosexuals off rooftops. Due to the group's particularly extremist interpretation of Islamic law, which tends (https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/life-under-isis-in-raqqa-the-city-where-smoking-a-cigarette-could-see-you-publicly-flogged-imprisoned-and-even-decapitated-10043969.html) to make it unpopular with local populations, ISIS has also been critical of Hamas' comparatively less strict application of Islamic law and authoritarian rule in Gaza as well as their repression (https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2017/10/how-salafisms-rise-threatens-gaza.html) of pro-ISIS activists. A 2015 video statement shared (https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-uncovered/isis-supporters-throw-down-gauntlet-hamas-gaza-n385006) on ISIS channels addressed Hamas as "tyrants" and warned that "the rule of Shariah (Islamic law) will be implemented in Gaza, in spite of you."

On a tactical level, further differences between Hamas and ISIS emerge. Hamas' strategy toward achieving their goal of an Islamic state in Palestine can be described as two-track: alongside militancy, Hamas has also participated in democratic elections and is pragmatic in its ambitions to accrue popular and international support. This sets it apart from ISIS, who eschew politics for militancy as the sole way to achieve their goals. ISIS considers democracy to be non-Islamic innovation (*bid'ah)* and democratic participation tantamount to worshipping an idol (*shirk*), an act of apostasy punishable by death. On the other hand, iterations of the Muslim Brotherhood including Mohamed Morsi (https://www.brookings.edu/articles/around-the-halls-mohamed-morsis-victory-and-the-future-of-egypts-transition/) in Egypt, Ra'am (https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_palestinian_politics/raam/) in Israel and Hamas (https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2006/1/26/hamas-wins-huge-majority) in the Palestinian Territories have won elections or been part of governing coalitions; although following Hamas' victory in the 2006 legislative elections, Israel and its international allies refused (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/24/gaza-election-hamas-2006-palestine-israel/) to allow Hamas to take power and supported Fatah against them in a brief civil war.

Lastly, although both Hamas and ISIS use political violence, the selection of their targets highlights further

discrepancies between the groups. While ISIS is infamous for inspiring attacks on civilians in foreign countries and attracting foreign nationals to live in and fight for its 'caliphate,' Hamas primarily targets Israelis in line with their more localised aims. Unlike ISIS, Hamas does not call (https://www.diis.dk/en/research/the-importance-of-understanding-the-differences-between-hamas-is-and-al-qaeda) for violence against Western targets.

Due to the differences between the two groups outlined above, it should not be surprising that ISIS and Hamas are in conflict (https://twitter.com/azelin/status/1712411200200315091) with each other. Hamas actively represses (https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2017/10/how-salafisms-rise-threatens-gaza.html) Salafi-Jihadism and ISIS supporters on its territory, and ISIS has declared Hamas to be apostates. Although ISIS encouraged further attacks on Jews worldwide after 7 October and expressed support for the Palestinian people, they did not (https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2023/10/al-qaedas-north-and-west-african-branches-respond-to-the-hamas-led-invasion-of-israel.php) name or express solidarity with the group, unlike other Salafi-jihadist organisations such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), demonstrating a spectrum (https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/islamist-groups-unite-around-israel-attack-diverge-on-hamas/) of Islamist extremist responses to the 7 October attack. In the most recent Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) magazine, reported (https://twitter.com/MoustafaAyad/status/1726770721282478493?t=oZ8EFDFWZtEkgF35krCH4g&s=19) by ISD analyst Moustafa Ayad as further proof that there is "no love lost between the Islamic State and Hamas", the group wrote: "for Hamas, the life of the Palestinian people does not matter. They are regarded as mere cannon fodder, and the "martyrdom" discourse is aimed at deceiving them."

Conclusion: An understandable but misleading comparison

While much of the conflation of Hamas and ISIS likely derives from sincere reactions of horror to the 7 October, drawing an exact parallel between Hamas and ISIS is both inaccurate and unhelpful. The ideological aims and the methods used by Hamas and ISIS as well as their political alliances diverge so fundamentally that equating the two groups' risks misunderstanding them both.

As Dino Krause of the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) warns (https://www.diis.dk/en/research/the-importance-of-understanding-the-differences-between-hamas-is-and-al-qaeda), although they "may be politically tempting" such conflations are "not conducive to a nuanced understanding of how these groups actually operate". It is important to recognise such ideological and tactical distinctions between Islamist extremist groups to understand the diverse militant, political and social approaches they use to pursue their objectives.

Methodological annex:

Boolean query for Brandwatch consisted of the following keywords: "HamasisISIS" OR "Hamas=ISIS" OR "Hamas-Isis" OR "Hamas_ISIS" OR "حماس_داعش" OR "חמאס-דאעש" OR ("Hamas" NEAR/10 "ISIS") OR "Hamas ISIS" OR ("Islamic State" AND "ISIS")

Footnotes

1. The PLO under Yasser Arafat recognised Israel and renounced violence in 1993 as part of the 'Oslo

Accords' in expectation of a Palestinian state. .

2. The question of ethnic cleansing is particularly emotive for Palestinians; in Gaza some 1.7 million of the 2.1 million inhabitants are refugees or their descendants who were displaced from Israel.

Related

(https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/pro-ccp-spamouflage-campaign-experiments-with-new-tactics-targeting-the-us/)

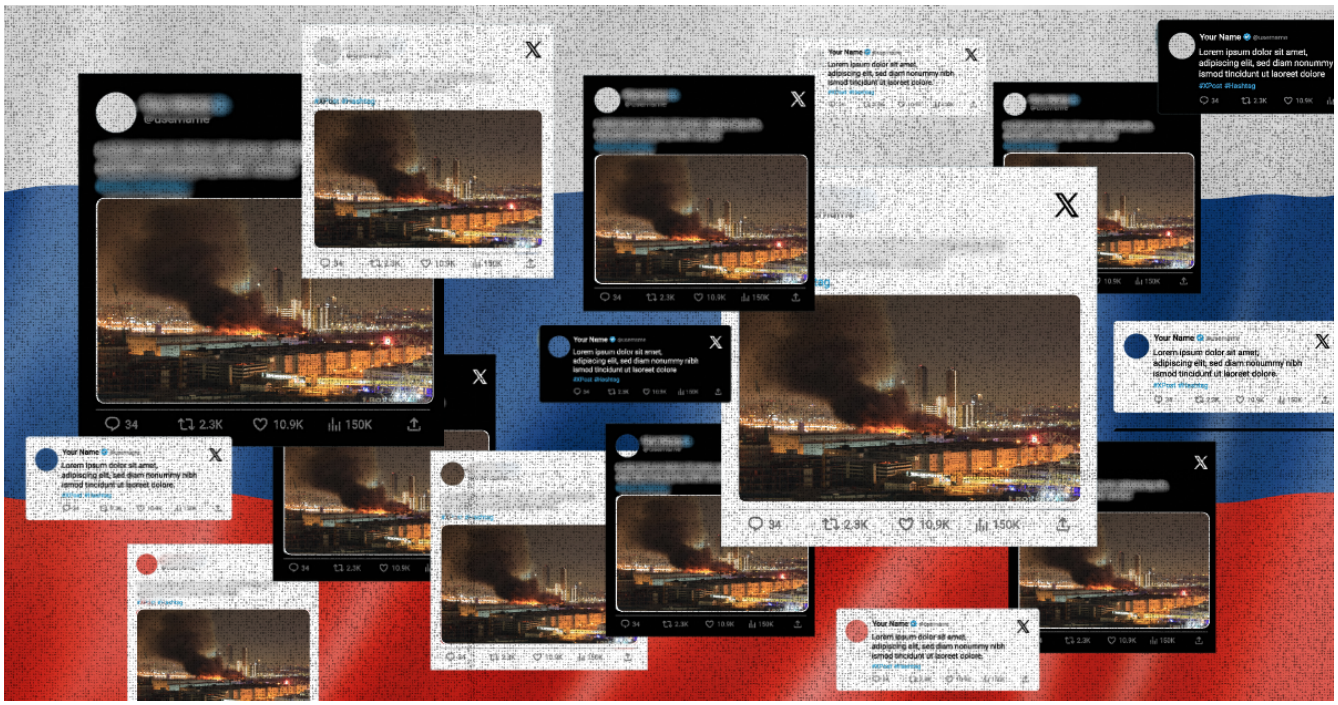
Pro-CCP Spamouflage campaign experiments with new tactics targeting the US (https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/pro-ccp-spamouflage-campaign-experiments-with-new-tactics-targeting-the-us/)

The pro-CCP network known as Spamouflage is a long-running and widespread but largely ineffective operation. However, there is evidence that the network is now experimenting with new ways to increase their influence.

(https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/pro-kremlin-responses-to-the-moscow-terrorist-attack-in-russia-germany-and-italy/)

Pro-Kremlin responses to the Moscow terrorist attack in Russia, Germany and Italy (https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/pro-kremlin-responses-to-the-moscow-terrorist-attack-in-russia-germany-and-italy/)

Pro-Kremlin actors have exploited the attack on Crocus City Hall to blame Ukraine and the West, even though the Islamic State's 'Khorasan Province' (ISKP) claimed responsibility for it. This Dispatch analyses online messages from pro-Kremlin actors in Russian, German and Italian.



(https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/the-islamic-states-amaq-goes-viral-premium-enabled-terror-content-on-x/)

The Islamic State's Amaq goes viral: Premium-enabled terror content on X (https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/the-islamic-states-amaq-goes-viral-premium-

enabled-terror-content-on-x/)

In the wake of the Crocus City Hall attack outside of Moscow, ISD analysed how the bodycam-style video of the attack spread across X, reaching 59.9 million views in 48 hours.

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